

*Bergen 2012*

## **RESCALING THE STATE IN FLANDERS**

### **NEW PROBLEM OR OLD SOLUTION?**

#### **A DESCRIPTIVE – CRITICAL APPROACH**

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## ABSTRACT

*The rescaling of state emphasizes the rise of the regional and the city-regional scale in particular, as a new unit for policy making. The new governing strategy is referred to as regional governance, where both governmental and / or nongovernmental entities work together for the purpose of joint policy making or service delivery. This paper focuses on the operationalization of regional governance and links those findings to the actual debates surrounding the institutional organization of Flanders. A quantitative analysis of regional arrangements in Flanders and in the area of Mid-West Flanders, helps to clarify the nature of the rescaling of the state: the rescaling is the result of bottom – up and top – down initiatives and covers as well joined government arrangements as collaborative governance arrangements integrating public and private organizations. Further, we notice different roles of the Flemish government, as she is present at the regional level both as a meta-governor, actor and financier.*

*By showing the nature and the content of regional governance, this paper helps to clarify the political debate that is going on now in Flanders. A debate dominated by classical institutional discussions and related to the issue of institutional fuzziness, efficiency and accountability.*

*It is argued however that the political discussion and the organization of the public sector in Flanders should be renewed and should be inspired by this relatively new phenomenon. The rescaling of the regional state should be understood by using concepts, theories and instruments inspired by the literature on networks and collaborative governance.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

One trend in current public administration is the focus on regional governance as a new governing strategy of public actors related to city regional problems (Herrschel and Newman 2002; Miller and Lee 2009; Tosics 2007; Kantor en Savitch 2010; Leibovitz 2003; Brenner 2002 and 2004; Ache 1999). Regional governance in that sense means working across public and private organizations and on a scale that crosses through the traditional scales of government.

A recent report (Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur, 2012) classifies more than 2.229 region-wide cooperation structures throughout the regions in Flanders. A great deal of them is set-up during the last decade, showing the growing significance of the upper-local level in the design of the public sector (see a.o. Herrschel and Newman 2002; Brenner 2002; Norris 2001). The inventory makes distinctions between the scales of action, the type of the governance structure, goals, organisational features, financial means, ... and the results in general joins up findings of international research: regional strategies assume different organizational forms at different 'levels' of action (Ansell and Gash 2007; Lee et.al. 2011; Mc Guire and Sylvia 2009; Agranoff and McGuire 2003).

Four main questions are dealt with in this paper. (1) How is regional governance operationalized in Flanders? (2) Can we find proof for the existence of collaborative governance strategies at the sub-regional level, how can this trend been analyzed and explained? (3) What type of policy issues does this relatively new phenomenon generates and (4) How do we deal as public administration scholars with those issues?

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides the theoretical foundation for the paper, exploring and synthetizing relevant literature on state rescaling and regional and collaborative governance. The theoretical reflections are followed by a quantitative analysis of regional governance activities in Flanders and in one region in particular: the area of Mid-West Flanders. In the third section, we develop some explanations for the rise of regional governance strategies in Flanders' regions. The last section deals with the question what this movement implies for the institutional organization of Flanders and refers to the debate that has been activated by our research.

## **II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Academic research on the "rescaling of state" emphasizes the importance of the regional and the city-regional scale in particular as a new unit for policy making (Herrschel and Newman 2002; Brenner 2002; Norris 2001). The transition from the local to the regional level is associated with the

rise of the so-called functional urban area, meaning that the socio-economic realities of life exceed the level and the capacities of individual local governments (see a.o. Tosics 2007 and 2011). Consequently, a growing number of significant social issues and different types of societal but also managerial problems require solution at a regional level (Miller and Lee 2009; Huxham and Vangen 2000). Working across boundaries and the scales of public and / or private entities at the city – regional scale thus has become a new governing strategy (Ansell and Gash, 2007). Joining forces can help in developing shared solutions for so-called wicked problems, where a multiplicity of interests come together (Huxham, 2003). Also, public actors can work together with private actors for the purpose of joined policy making or service provision, which would lead to more efficient and effective policy outcomes (Ansell and Gash, 2007).

Literature points out several drivers – but also possible barriers - for region-wide cooperation (see a.o. Kantor en Savitch 2010; Leibovitz 2003; Norris 2001; Herrschel en Newman 2002; Vangen and Huxham 2003). Economic related research focuses on the process of globalization and the need for local governments to join forces in a highly competitive world. Apart from economic development motives, local governments involve in cooperation strategies as a response to increasing financial pressures. However, globalization has two faces. Kantor and Savitch (2010) suggest that the economic change has made some business sectors more connected to international markets and less to local or regional economies (Kantor and Savitch, 2010: 8). Another obstacle towards cooperation occurs when the economic competition affects the regional level itself, leading to rivalry among local governments in a certain area (Leibovitch, 2003).

A second group of arguments is of a more political nature. In the ideal scenario of state rescaling, central governments act as a meta-governor, shaping supporting frameworks and promoting measures to encourage region-wide cooperation. However, this is not always the case. Kantor (2006) suggests that state governments might prefer to deal with local governments on their own, *“making concessions and cutting special deals to win their cooperation in achieving departmental priorities”* (Kantor, 2006: 819). This may also be the case the other way around, where local governments *“avoid team-playing with other local governments in favor of using their own direct channels of influence to get what they want from national governmental agencies”* (Kantor and Savitch, 2010: 10). Beside this, local governments may oppose cooperation because they fear a loss of power and autonomy (Kantor and Savitch, 2010).

Public administration scholars refer to the new direction of public policy making as regional governance: *“a variety of intergovernmental and interorganizational strategies to enhance cooperation and coordination among government agencies as well as between public and private*

*institutions and actors*” (Brenner, 2002: 5).<sup>1</sup> The framework of Miller and Lee gives a useful and more empirical approach of the components of this definition (Miller and Lee, 2009: 131):

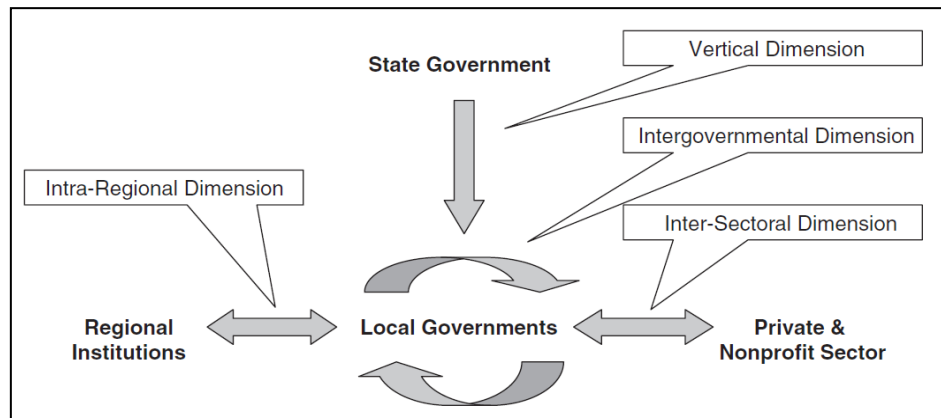


Figure 1 – A four dimensional model for classifying metropolitan regions (Miller and Lee, 2009: 131)

The framework classifies regional governance along four dimensions. The position of local governments is the focal point in each dimension. The first is a vertical dimension and highlights the relationship between a municipality and higher levels of government related to regional governance problems. The other dimensions are of a horizontal nature. Partnerships among local governments in a certain area are labelled as the intergovernmental dimension. The inter-sectoral dimension highlights the relations between local governments and private and/or nonprofit entities, whilst the intra-regional dimension focuses on cooperation within regional institutions.

In each dimension, various types of cooperation activities can be distinguished. Regional strategies may assume different empirical forms and labels at different ‘levels’ of governance (Ansell and Gash 2007; Lee et.al. 2011; Mc Guire and Sylvia 2009; Agranoff and McGuire 2003). Following the typology of Sorensen and Torfing (2009), the different types might cover both:

- Formalised structures as well as informal processes;
- Temporary activities (e.g. the solution of a concrete issue) as well as more general structures (e.g. longstanding patterns of joint effort)
- Practices aiming for collective decision making and practices who focus merely on deliberation and consultation among the participators;
- Open and closed (only a select group of participants) structures.

<sup>1</sup> A number of synonyms for regional governance pop-up in academic research. They include a.o.t. metropolitan regionalism, new regionalism, regionalism, metropolitan governance and city-regional governance.

Collaborative governance in a more strict sense is one possible form of governance: all forms of collaborative governance are types of regional governance but not all the dimensions of the figure cover collaborative governance structures. The concept of collaborative governance has been used by different authors (see a.o. Mandell 2001; Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Ansell and Gash 2007; Lee et.al. 2001; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Purdy 2012; McGuire and Sylvia 2009; Vangen and Huxham 2003). Ansell and Gash (2007) present a baseline definition of what collaborative governance is about: *“A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets”* (Ansell and Gash, 2007: 544). Following this definition, some main features of collaborative governance come to the fore.

At first, collaborative arrangements imply the involvement of private actors. As such, the definition does not encompass practices of multi-organizational efforts within the public sector (the vertical and intergovernmental dimension in the figure). The latter could be referred to as collaborative government or joined-up government (Huxham and Vangen 2000; Huxham 2003; Sorensen and Torfing, 2009). A second criteria focuses on collaborative governance as a formal activity, meaning that the arrangement involves *“joint activities, joint structures and shared resources”* (Walter and Perr, 2000:495). The focus is on the collectivity of actors and is subject of management activities combining resources of different autonomous organizations. Thirdly, the decision making process is of a consensus-oriented nature. This statement is interlinked with the shift from government to governance and the failures of a downstream implementation of policy. Stoker (2004) argues: *“Governance is not about one individual making a decision but rather about groups of individuals or organizations or systems of organizations making decisions”* (Stoker, 2004: 3). Consensus-oriented means that there is a dynamic interaction between the goals of the actors leading to a common goal. Consensus – oriented doesn’t exclude conflicts but implies strategies and an active type of management to deal with those conflicts. Finally, the focus of the partnership can be both on policy making and policy implementation. This means that partnerships committed with the execution of policy developed by other entities (fi central governments), do count as collaborative governance arrangements, even though they are not in charge of policy making.

### **III. OPERATIONALIZING REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN FLANDERS**

In recent years, a set of our own studies zoomed in on the city – regional level in Flanders, each of them with a different focus. In 2005, Tubex, De Rynck, Voets en Wayenberg made a first inventory of vertical regional arrangements situated in the socio-economic and spatial-ecological field. A

distinction was made between three different groups of ‘network designers’ (the Flemish government, European Union and other actors). In the study of Wayenberg, De Rynck and Voets (2007), the focus was again on the vertical dimension of regional governance (‘joined – up government’). The authors made a list of 372 arrangements in Flanders, in all relevant policy domains, which involve more than one governmental layer (the local, provincial and/or Flemish government). The focal point of study of De Rynck and Decorte (2010) was on two regions in Flanders: the region of South-West and the region of Mid-West Flanders. We made an inventory of all the formalized collaboration arrangements (vertical, horizontal, regional institutions, public – private partnerships) in which at least two autonomous actors were involved. For this end, we developed a tool to classify the variety of organizational structures in those regions following a set of variables (De Rynck et.al. 2010, 2011). The inventory lists up a total of 135 regional governance structures in the South-West and 163 regional structures in the Mid-West area. This tool has then been taken over by the Flemish government to make a complete X-ray of all the regions in Flanders (Agency of Internal Affairs, 2012). For this purpose, the Flemish minister of Internal Affairs ordered the governors of the five provinces in Flanders to make a list of all collaboration structures in their area. The practices under investigation include *“all formalized structures aiming for consultation or collaboration, in which more than one independent organization is involved and with a regional focus.”* The exercise resulted in a database for the whole of the Flemish region and counts 2.229 governance structures. Each of them is classified according to some mean variables. Those include the scale of action, the type of governance structure, goals, organizational features, partners and financial means. In the next paragraphs, we briefly present some general findings of the inventory.<sup>2</sup>

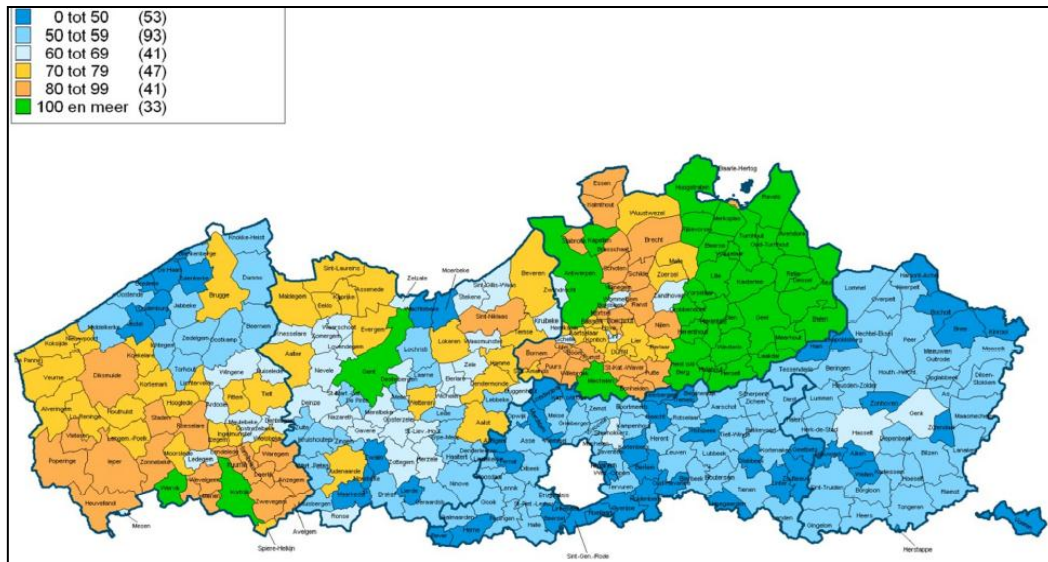
In its White Paper on the internal state reform of Flanders, the Flemish government describes this growing number of regional arrangements in rather negative terms. The White paper speaks of a *“proliferation of structures at the intermediate governmental layer”* (Flemish government, 2011: 21). The White paper also outlines some negative consequences of this trend. Those include *“institutional fuzziness”*, a lack of efficiency and an accountability problem in democratic terms. We match those problems now with our findings and doing this, we raise the question of the role of public administration scholars in this type of debate. We start our analysis by exploring the material in this paragraph and in the next paragraph by explaining the spectacular rise of the number of regional arrangements. Finally we tackle the basic questions: what, if any, should be the use of this analysis in the political debate on regional governance that has been dominated so far by the rather negative terms used in the official documents of the Flemish government?

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<sup>2</sup> The database and the report are open for public consultation. See <http://binnenland.vlaanderen.be/werking-besturen/gebiedsdekkende-regioscreening-vlaanderen>

### *Intensity of regional governance*

The regional screening shows that one municipality is involved in an average of 68 formalized collaboration structures. This number varies between 30 and 152. Map 1 shows the considerable differentiation across the Flemish municipalities. That is the **first intermediate conclusion**: not all regions are equal. If there is a problem, then it depends partly on the nature of the region.



Map 1: Average number of cooperation structures per municipality

In general, the average number of cooperation structures goes with the population number of a local government. The middle number of structures for municipalities with more than 100.000 residents is 93. The number declines to 59 for local governments with a population less than 10.000. **Second intermediate conclusion**: the nature, size and type of local government seems to be important to explain the regional differentiation.

### *Expansion of the regional arrangements*

When we take a look at the date of the creation of those governance structures, we see that cooperation at the regional level in Flanders is not a new phenomenon: we witness a steady but slow marking grow since the 1960s and 1970s, a sharp increase since the 1990s and an explosion of collaboration since the years 2000. If there is a problem (the **third intermediate remark**), it is a relatively new problem.



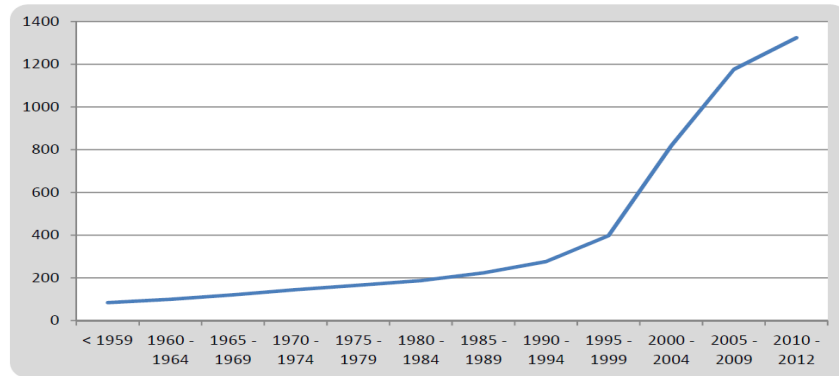
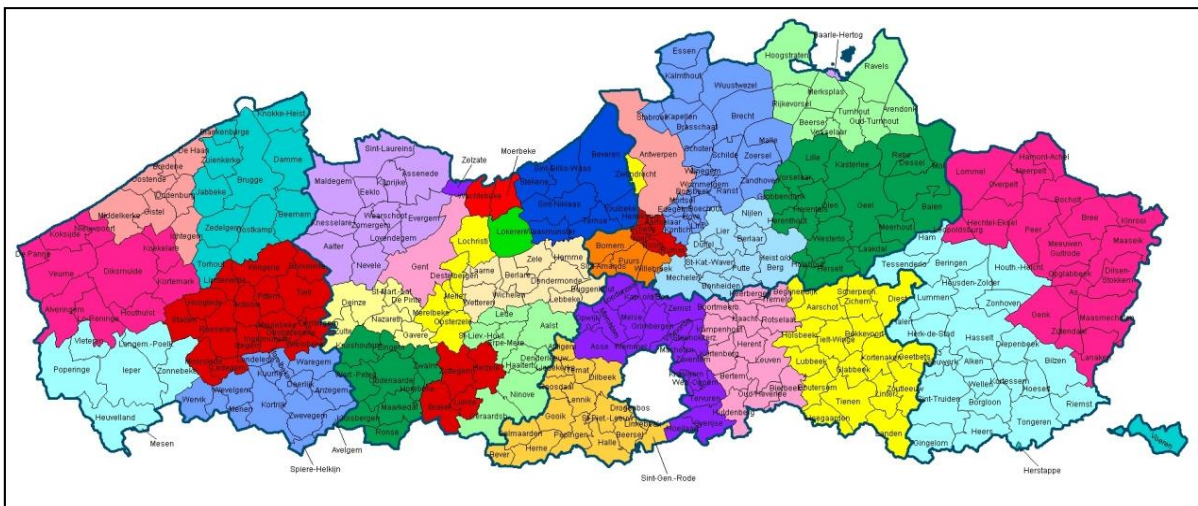


Chart 1 – number of cooperation structures according to date of creation

### *Clusters of collaboration*

Is there a clustering of cooperation at the regional level? In other words, can we distinguish groups of municipalities who work closer together with each other than with other municipalities? In order to answer this question, each of the 308 Flemish municipalities is put in a matrix with other municipalities. The matrix indicates for each municipality the number of partnerships that municipality X shares with municipality X, Y or Z. The cluster analysis for the province of West-Flanders is shown in annex 1. Map 2 gives a cartographic presentation of the clusters throughout Flanders. The clusters are marked out on a 50 % value. This means that all municipalities in one group share at least 50 % of the arrangements in which they are involved with each other. This inspires our **fourth intermediate finding**: there is, although with regional differences, such a thing as ‘a reference region’ in which a group of local governments work together for an important set of topics.



Map 2 – Cluster analysis on a 50 % rate

### **Micro-analysis of collaborative activities in the Mid-West region**



### Map 3 – Mid-West region

In this section we integrate a meta-analysis of the partnerships and arrangements in the Mid-West region (Decorte and De Rynck, 2010), using this region as a lab to illustrate further the complexity behind the regional phenomenon. The first goal is to deepen our understanding of the ways in which regional governance is deployed in Flanders. Can we join up the types used in the framework of Miller and Lee (2009)? Secondly, we want to examine whether we find support for the international trend towards collaborative governance: arrangements where both public and private actors meet for the purpose of collective policy making or implementation. As stated earlier: collaborative governance is only one type of regional governance but it could be considered a the most important one, related to the definition of possible problems associated with regional governance in Flemish policy documents.

The Mid-West region is a rather rural area in the middle of the province of West-Flanders clustering small municipalities around two cities (Roeselare and Tielt). The region consists of 17 municipalities. The biggest municipality is Roeselare, with a number of 57.432 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> In our research we counted a total of 163 arrangements of a certain governance type (Decorte and De Rynck, 2010). We zoom in on the variation between them using the following six variables:

- Policy domain
- Initiator
- Partners
- Financial resources
- Function
- Field of action

### Policy domain

<sup>3</sup> Population number on 1 January 2010

In a first level of analysis, the partnerships are classified according to their core business. Chart 2 shows that collaboration in the Mid-West is highly specialized. Structures were counted in 16 different policy domains. Actors work mostly together in ‘soft’ domains. 23% are active in the sphere of social employment, followed by 21% in the realm of health care, child care and care for disabled persons. A minor part of the structures is active in the field of management and administration (management of the back office assets of local governments). Those latter arrangements are mostly set up as a shared service between a group of municipalities, for instance for the joint management of ICT or personnel administration (De Rynck et.al. 2011). It can be mentioned here already that the notion of collaborative governance certainly could not be used for all this types of collaboration.

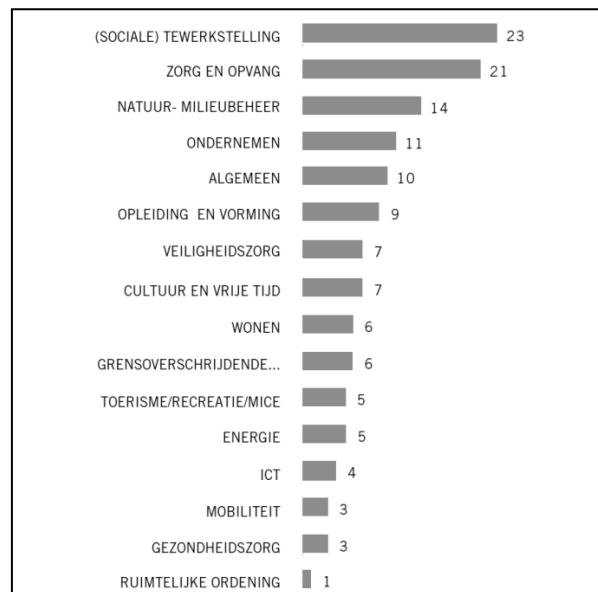


Chart 2 – collaboration structures along policy domain

The most important, and the **fifth intermediate conclusion** is that those governance structures are very much specialized or sectorialized: they develop mostly within the sphere of one policy sector or policy domain, bringing together actors active in that specific domain. The governance explosion at the regional level partly is a sector – inspired phenomenon and understanding this phenomenon requires a thorough analysis of intrasectoral dynamics (shifts in interaction between central and local governments and between public and private actors).

#### *Initiator*

Two third of the partnerships in the Mid-West region are set up by public actors.<sup>4</sup> 21% starts from local initiative. Apart from the creation of bottom-up partnerships, the latter can also be designed from above (see also Sorensen and Torfing, 2009). Front runner are the provinces with 34%. The

<sup>4</sup> Initiators are found out for 115 structures

provinces make up the intermediate tier in Flanders, between the level of the local governments and the Flemish government. The province has been especially active in this region, creating partnerships and projects within their powers to conduct area bounded regional actions with local governments and non – profit organizations. Also the federal government is present at the sub-regional level (7%), defining special districts for police and fire brigades. The Flemish government is accountable for 4% of the partnerships. A minor part of the arrangements is set up by regional institutions, mostly by Regional Social and Economic Advisory Boards (RESOC). The latter is by the way itself an example of a collaborative governance partnership: a formalized structure where both public and private actors meet for the purpose of joint policy making at the regional level. Finally, the nonprofit sector is the initiator of 19% of the partnerships. **Intermediate conclusion six:** the creation of regional governance structures is not caused by one level of government: it seems that (1) all levels of government in the same period created or activated regional governance structures and that (2) public as well as private actors created them. The rescaling of the state is caused by all the actors that are part of ‘the state’.

When we compare these numbers with those of the neighboring South-West region (see charts below), differences and similarities come to the fore, showing the contingency of the regional governance settings.<sup>5</sup> In the South-West region, the role of the provinces is far less dominant (creation of 18% of the governance arrangements). Instead we mark a leading role for the organization of inter-municipal cooperation for the development of the area (Leiedal). A similar intermunicipal organization doesn’t exist in the Mid-West. This intermunicipal partnership functions as service deliverer towards its members (13 local governments of the South-West region) and focuses on the development of the region. The leading role of Leiedal is due to the longstanding tradition of inter-municipal and regional cooperation between public and private actors in the South-West region (De Rynck et.al., 2011). **Intermediate conclusion seven:** the balances between the relevant actors in creating regional arrangements differ and rescaling the state partly is contingent to regional features and path dependencies.

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<sup>5</sup> Initiators are find out for 90 structures

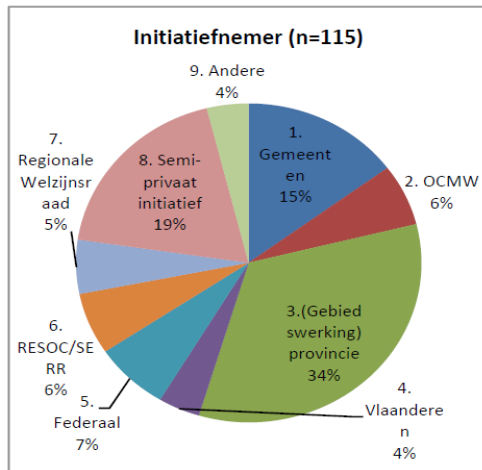


Chart 3 – Initiators in the Mid-West region

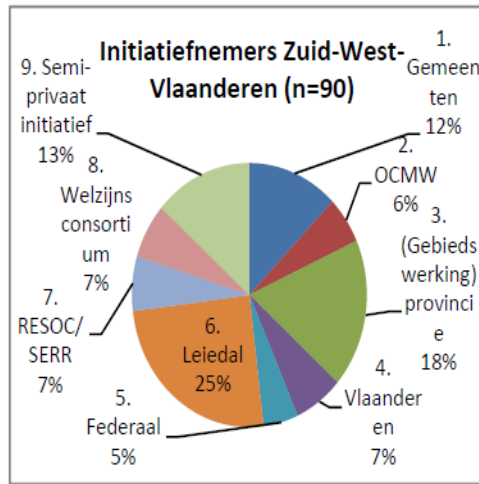


Chart 4 – Initiators in the South-West region

### Partners

The framework of Miller and Lee (2009) distinguishes four dimensions of regional governance. Our analysis shows that all of the dimensions apply in the Mid-West region. 15% of the arrangements are classified in the vertical dimension, meaning that several levels of government are involved. Local governments (the intergovernmental dimension) are the most represented actor in partnerships (29%). The intra-regional dimension (involvement of regional institutions) counts for 17 % and those regional institutions themselves are of a collaborative governance type, the mayor part being for the social and economic development agencies (RESOC) and regional welfare consultation agencies (RWO). Private and nonprofit actors (the inter-sectoral dimension) sit around the table in 28% of the collaborative arrangements. This means that 28% of the partnerships in the Mid-West region can be labeled as collaborative governance structures as defined in international literature. But the analysis also reveals that regional governance in the broadest sense, covers a set of arrangements: the local – central type; the local – local type; the public – public type; the public – private type and the private – private type. Even in such a small region as the Mid-West, it is quite astonishing to see such a huge amount of different types of interorganizational governance structures. This was also the immediate reflex when for instance mayors were confronted with this inventory.

**Conclusion eight:** the region is the focus area for a whole set of governance types of which collaborative governance is a minority. This means that other explanations than those associated in literature with collaborative governance should be used to understand the regional phenomenon.

**Conclusion nine:** what has been called ‘regional institutions’ in the framework of Miller and Lee covers in fact organizations of a collaborative governance type. At least on this point the framework has to be adapted for the Flemish case.

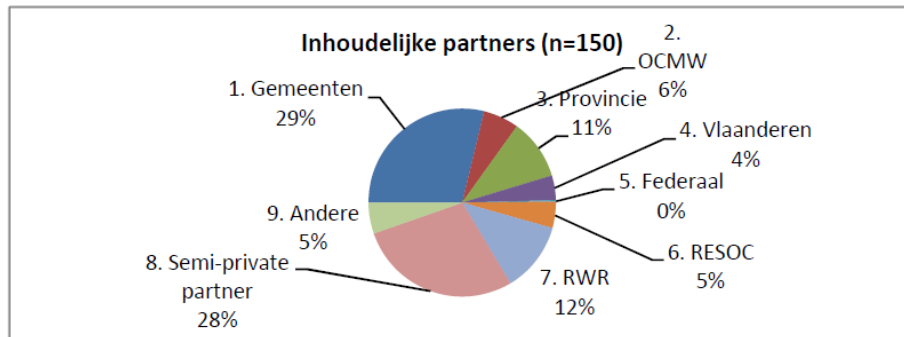


Chart 5 – Partners of the arrangements

### *Financial resources*

In our study we were able to make an inventory of the financial partners of 105 of the 163 arrangements. The analysis of the non – response revealed that the other 58 arrangements didn’t have any financial resources on their own. This could be an indicator of their marginal importance. Chart 6 illustrates that a quarter of the means derive from local governments and that more than 50% of the partnerships are financed with money from other public actors, even for those arrangements dominated by representatives of the local governments. This means that, even though the central authorities (Flemish and federal government) are involved in only 15% of the partnerships, their financial weight is more than three times as big. At this point, it is not clear whether this financial power is translated into content-related power. Further qualitative research is needed here. However, the inventory counted only the number of times a certain actor acts as financial partner in an arrangement. The actual weight of the share is not included. This means that for instance an actor who finances 2% and another who finances 75% of the same partnership are both counted as one. As a results, the numbers and their relations ask for some modification (Decorte and De Rynck, 2010).

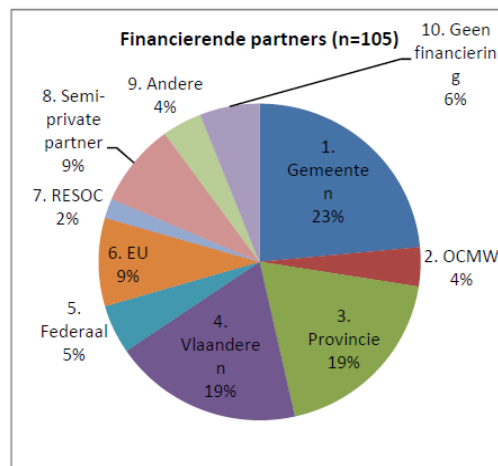


Chart 6 – Financial resources

**Conclusion ten:** Central government and especially the Flemish government is part of the regional governance arrangements, also in those arrangements which seem to be of a horizontal nature (local governments working together or local public and local private actors working together). Also on this point the figure of Miller and Lee should be adapted to understand the Flemish case: there is a mix of vertical and horizontal elements in the regional arrangements.

**Conclusion eleven:** The position and role of the provinces makes the Flemish figure even more complicated; the province is not a central government of the same nature as the Flemish government. It is closely interwoven with local government and could be considered as part of the horizontal arrangements. In practice however, the provinces also have their own political ambitions and from that viewpoint they are sometimes acting as a ‘vertical’ actor, creating their own programs in some regions.

### *Function*

Our inventory of the Mid – West region classifies the arrangements according to their function. However, the results also need to be handled with care. They present a first estimation of the goal and activities of the partnerships, asked themselves to print a stamp on their functioning. Further, the partnerships could only nominate themselves for one function, even though certainly a number of them fulfills more than one role (Decorte and De Rynck, 2011). Following the typology of Agranoff (2007), four types can be distinguished: information networks, development networks, service delivery networks and action networks. The function is interlinked with the impact of the partnership on the development of policy in the area.

*Information networks* are mainly focused on information exchange between the members of the network. Examples in the Mid-West region are the Conference of Mayors or meetings between civil

servants working in a certain policy domain. The accent in this type of partnerships is on delegation of knowledge and briefing about one's own actions. As is shown in the chart below, information networks count for 20 % of the networks in the Mid-West region. Apart from information exchange, the intention of *development networks* lies on the synchronization of the policy of the different actors in the network. Typical examples are the networks in the domains of health and welfare, where different organizations use the network to align on policy and concrete dossiers. Approximately half of the networks are of a *service delivery type*. Service delivery can be focused both on citizens (for example social service delivery) as on local governments (both in sector-specific domains as in back-office support). A typical example is the aforementioned inter-municipal cooperation for the development of the area. *10% of the networks registered in the Mid-West region are of the action network type*; they have a focus on the development of policy with an impact on the region. Examples of this type are partnerships involved in the development of touristic or social housing programs or organizations with a focus on public utilities (Decorte en De Rynck, 2010).

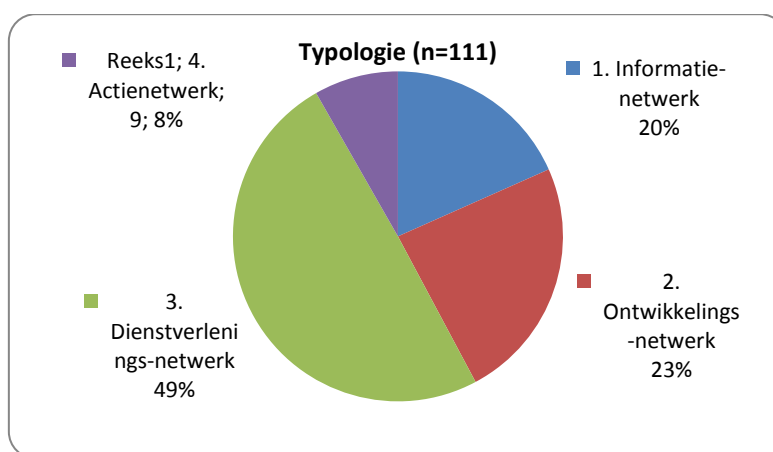


Chart 7 – Function of the arrangements

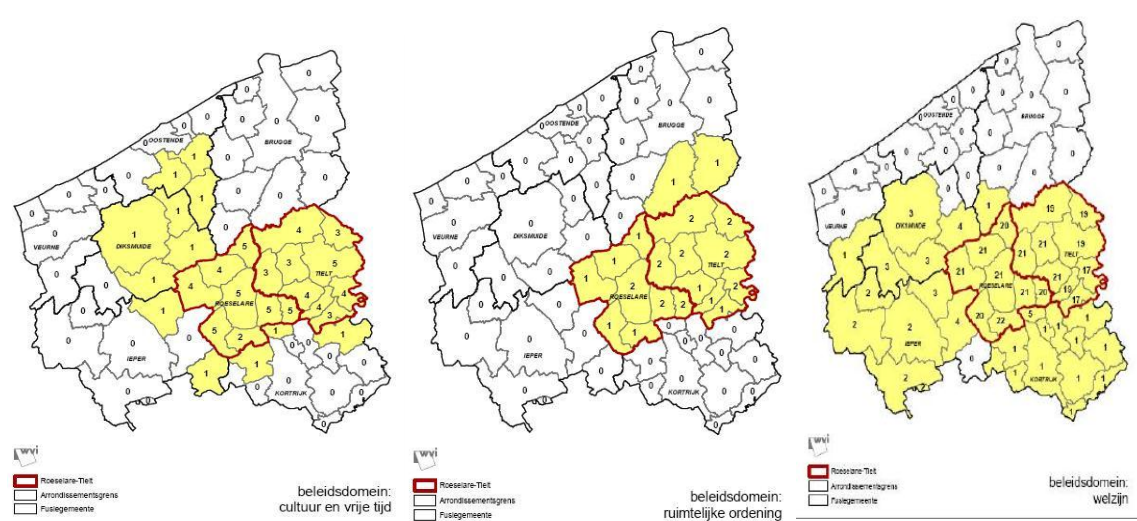
**Conclusion twelve:** we mentioned earlier that 28% of the arrangements are of the collaborative governance type. Now we can add more detail: most of them are of the service delivery type and a minority of the 'policy making' type. From our analysis we know also that the vast majority of the service delivery type is created within the framework of the sectoral policies of the Flemish government. We keep this in mind when we focus on the political perceptions on the regional phenomenon.

#### *Field of action*

We used mapping tools to illustrate the spatial spread of the partnerships. This leads us to the **intermediate conclusion thirteen:** the flexibility of scales. This applies in two ways. The first is a differentiation along policy domain. Map 4 gives some examples. The map shows the scale of the

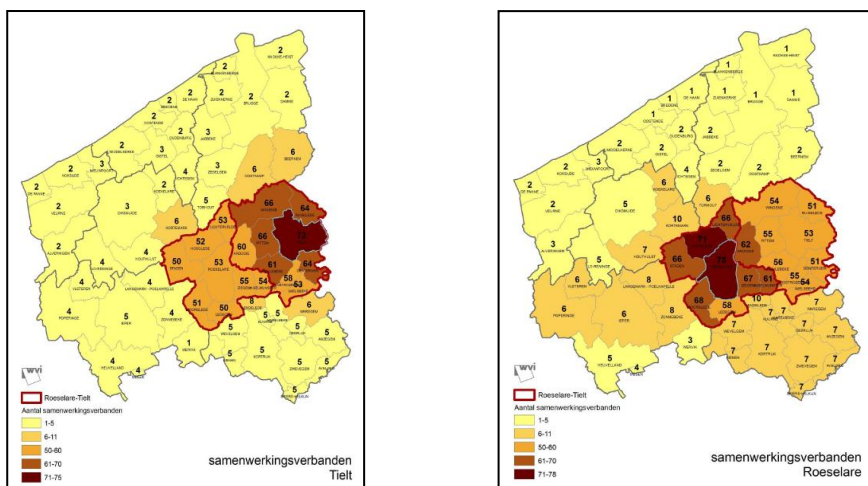


‘cultural and recreational area’ (left), the ‘spatial planning area’ (middle) and the ‘welfare area’ (right). ‘Area’ here means the scale (indicated by the number of municipalities) on which the most important governance structures in that policy domain operate.



Map 4 – Different scales of action along policy domain

A second factor of flexibility is linked to the intensity of cooperation between municipalities. The cluster analysis detects groups of municipalities who work closer together with each other than with others. This is showed in map 5, where the dark colors represent the most intense degree of cooperation (Decorte and De Rynck, 2010). The different scales of action indicate that ‘the area’ in fact does not exist, although there is a kind of common ‘reference – area’ in the core of the region, with a considerable part of arrangements organized on that reference scale (as we mentioned earlier). We refer to the functional urban area and scholars who state that the area is made up by social and economic realities instead of political and administrative borders (see a.o. Tosics 2007; Voets and De Rynck 2005). We see how the mix of both rationales leads to a flexible region with open borders.



Map 5 – cluster analysis in the Mid-West region

## IV. EXPLAINING REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN FLANDERS

The inventory of the regional screening shows a rise of governance structures in Flanders since the years 2000. There are several arguments used to understand what is going on. First there is the impact of the Flemish Decree on Inter-municipal Cooperation, in which the Flemish government act as a ‘meta – governor’ for intermunicipal cooperation. The decree of 2001 provides a legal framework for the set-up of voluntary partnerships among municipalities but especially creates new types and more flexible types of cooperation. 13% of the counted arrangements in the regional screening are of this type and the number has risen considerably from 2001 onwards: the decree has had a clear impact on the cooperative behavior of local governments (see chart 8).

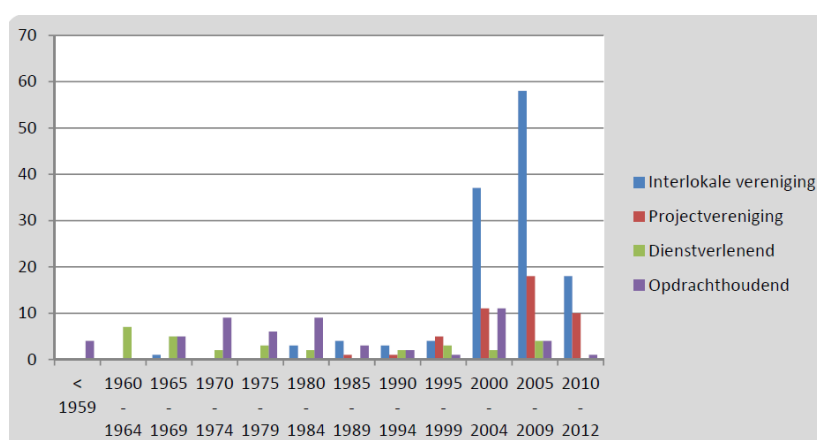


Chart 8 – Types of intermunicipal cooperation according to start date

The decree enables four modes of inter-municipal cooperation: inter-local partnerships, project partnerships, service delivery partnerships and partnerships with assignment. Only inter-local partnerships have no legal body. Like project partnerships, their scale of action is limited to an average of six joining municipalities. There is however a clear separation between the scale of action of the former and the other two types of inter-municipal cooperation (with an average of 20 to 22 municipalities). Table 1 gives an overview of the different types of inter-municipal partnerships and the top three of the policy domains in which they function.

Type of inter-municipal cooperation	Average number of participating municipalities	Policy domain	Percentage
Inter-local partnership	6	Housing	26%
		Education	16%
		Sports	16%
Project partnership	6.7	Culture	43%
		Cultural heritage	15%
		Policy wide	12%
Service delivery partnership	22	Policy wide	33%
		Administration and management	17%
		Spatial planning	8%
Partnership with assignment	20	Public utility services	51%
		Environment	31%
		Policy wide	10%

Table 1 – Mode of intermunicipal cooperation along policy domain

Another strategy used by the Flemish government is the allocation of grants towards municipalities if they decide to work together. This method is for example used in the sphere of housing policy and culture. Apart from stimulating intergovernmental partnerships (Miller and Lee, 2009), local governments sometimes also are forced into cooperation structures by the Flemish government.

**Conclusion fourteen:** The Flemish government in her role as meta – governor of intermunicipal cooperation changed the institutional framework (decree, financial incentives and imposed cooperation). Part of the rise of the number of regional arrangements, which is contested now by the

present Flemish government, is the direct effect of the policies of the Flemish government as meta – governor in the past.

The second argument has been introduced earlier: due to the creation of sectoral decrees the Flemish government obliges the foundation of special-purpose authorities on a regional scale. This is for example the case in the domain of welfare and health, where the Flemish government requires the foundation of associations who organize consultation and better implementation of Flemish policies between actors in the health care. Another example can be found in the socio-economic sphere and the presence of agencies who are responsible for the social and economic development of a certain sub-region.<sup>6</sup>

**Conclusion fifteen:** If the Minister of Internal Affairs in his White Paper complains of a fuzzy regional scene, then another important part of the explanation of the changed nature of this scene, is the creation, by Flemish Ministers in earlier and in the present Flemish government, of new types of top-down imposed governance structures, fitted in the sectoral policies for whom those Ministers are responsible. The problem, if any, is created by the colleagues of the Minister that defines the problem.

Both institutional drivers (the meta – governor for intermunicipal cooperation and the sectoral top-down initiatives) show the important impact of the Flemish government. Of course both drivers could not be interpreted in an isolation of broader contextual features. They both are part of the clear uprising of scales; caused by the upscaling of important organizations in the regional areas (schools, hospitals, welfare organizations, trade unions,...); caused by the need to collaborate in order to set up a socio - economic strategy or to cope with important policy problems in domains as spatial planning, safety policy or youth policies. The results of the ‘regional screening’, mixed with the variables explaining those results, clearly show that the rescaling of the state is going on, even in the Flemish region. This brings us to the final section of this paper: what should be, if any, the impact of those findings on the organization of the public sector in Flanders?

## **V. REGIONAL GOVERNANCE AND THE INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION OF FLANDERS**

Flanders is one of the three regions of the Belgian federal state (besides the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region). The federal level, this is well-known for foreign scholars, is involved in

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<sup>6</sup> There are 15 regional social-economic advisory boards in Flanders, based on formal representation of local and provincial governments, delegations of the trade unions and of the associations of companies.

ongoing discussions about the big state reform of Belgium. But our research shows that the Flanders region faces its own small state reform or at least is engaged in discussions of a state reform type (De Rynck et.al., 2011). We mentioned earlier that the proliferation of structures is considered by the Flemish government to be a major problem of institutional fuzziness, of a lack of efficiency and of democratic control (White Paper on the Internal State Reform, 2011). Our description and analysis of the field helps us to dig deeper, although our research is only a first step to improve our knowledge of what is going on in those regional arrangements. We didn't analyze the efficiency of all those arrangements, a Sisyphus – work this would be.

### *Institutional fuzziness*

In its draft paper on the internal state reform, the Flemish advisory council for policy affairs states that *“the unclear landscape of cooperation arrangements at the upper-local and intermediate level, hinders the management of the field and the synchronization of policy”* (Vlabest, 2010: 10). One possible resolution the Council proposes to ‘clean up the mess’, is the installation of fixed boundary areas in which cooperation structures need to fit in.

The analysis in the previous section shows a great diversity of activities, with different empirical forms and at different levels of governance. The inventory shows that different issues and problems require a different regional governance strategy at various scales of action. Instead of trying to force all regional arrangements in the same ‘reference scale’, working with the concept of ‘open scale in an open region’ seems to be more appropriate. Working with and in different regional arrangements requires the capacities to work at different levels of action.

### *Lack of efficiency*

The problem of the institutional fuzziness is related to the efficiency: different policy problems or implementation arrangements need their own scale to be efficient. Imposing the same standard scale for all of them could harm the efficiency of most of them.

The problem of efficiency of the set of regional arrangements, at this point of the analysis, is the easiest one to answer: we do not have the faintest idea. Whose concept of efficiency should guide us? For some regional arrangements the concept of efficiency is hard to apply: how to measure the efficiency of an information network between administrative experts that is only based on exchange of information during two or three meetings a year? Our analysis however is useful to develop more adapted analytical grids to measure efficiency. There is for instance a need for another approach to measure efficiency of a service delivery network then for a policy network that is based on bottom – up dynamics. In the case of service delivery, the policy goals of the Flemish government could be

used to set the standard for measurement while in the case of the policy networks, the standards for evaluating efficiency in an ongoing process of consensus building, should be part of the process management itself.

### *The accountability problem*

*“The enormous institutional fuzziness at the upper-local level has consequences for the democratic control ... Especially council members have barely an oversight of the various partnerships in which their municipality participates. In this case, keeping control becomes very difficult”* (Vlabest, 2010: 11). Also on this point our analysis can help to develop adapted frameworks for research and maybe even a more adapted framework for debate. In the case of information exchange and coordination networks and in the case of service delivery, the notion of accountability has a different meaning compared to accountability in a setting of collaborative governance in policy making. What is the democratic problem in cases of information exchange or coordination? What is the meaning of accountability in the case of an implementation arrangement? Accountable in the latter case seems to be understood here as being accountable to the government whose policy the arrangement is implementing (Flemish government or local government) and being accountable to the clients for whom the arrangement is created.

Another variable that influences the democratic debate is linked to the different dimensions of regional governance. We believe that different debates unfold as we compare joined-up partnerships or activities of collaborative governance, where a multitude of actors (both public and private) are involved. Figure 2 shows the accountability pattern in inter-municipal partnerships. Since no other partners are involved, the responsibility for the democratic level of the partnership is completely in hands of the various municipalities.

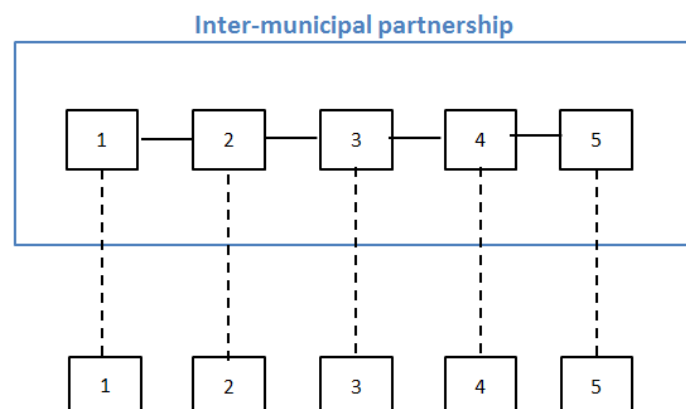
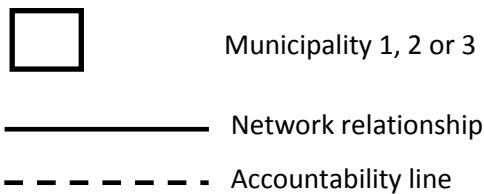


Figure 2 – Accountability lines in inter-municipal partnerships



On the other hand, Figure 3 below shows the relationships and accountability lines in a collaborative governance arrangement. We use the case of the Regional Social and Economic Advisory Boards (RESOC).

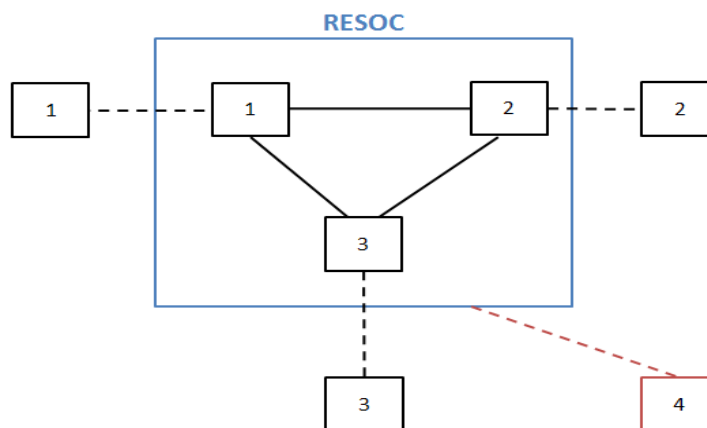
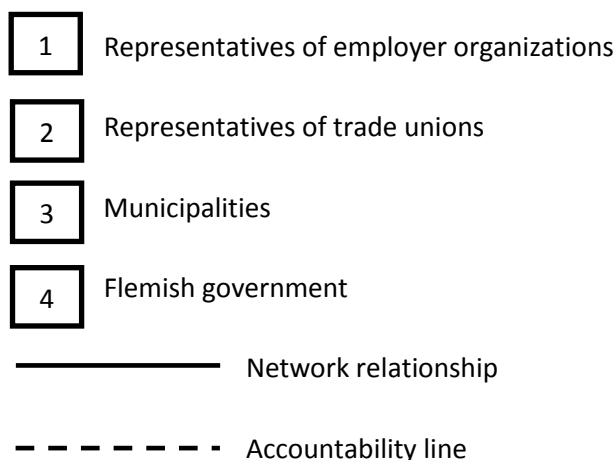


Figure 3 – Accountability lines in collaborative governance structures



As showed in the figure, each partner in the arrangement is accountable towards its own organization and the organization as a whole is responsible towards the Flemish government, since it is the latter who co-finances and created this type of regional arrangement. In a more broader sense, the organization is also accountable to ‘the region’ and the public served.

Based on those arguments, we can pop-up the argument that this kind of regional arrangement can in fact enrich the democratic level of policy making since a whole set of actors is involved and the organization is accountable to those different actors. This concept of accountability is derived from the network theories. Instead of creating problems of accountability, the familiar way of looking,

those network organizations could also be seen as an enrichment of local democracy and certainly this interpretation comes closer to the network nature.

One element of the democratic debate has been object of our research in the Mid – West and South – West regions. How well are local governments organized to cope with the regional arrangements, which seems to be a relatively new phenomenon? In any cases and certainly in the horizontal joined up government arrangements, their internal organization should be object of further research. Voluntary partnerships among municipalities are a frequently used collaborative activity in Flanders. Municipalities join forces in an attempt to enhance their governmental capacity and / or to deal with social problems and issues that cannot be tackled alone. How do municipalities adapt to this new government style? Who are the local representatives and how does the municipality keep control? Subsequently, does the increasing rise of intergovernmental cooperation really strengthen the own governmental capacity? Those and other questions were subject of debate in panel discussions with the city managers of the municipalities in the Mid-West region. The overall conclusion is that the internal management of the municipalities is not yet adapted to the evolution towards joined-up government (De Rynck et.al. 2011a):

- (1) There is little interference of the local governmental institutions (Management team, Council and Executive of Mayor and Aldermen) with the partnerships.
- (2) Both civil servants and / or political delegates may represent the municipality in the partnership. However, the authority of the mandatories is often not clearly defined.
- (3) Municipalities often do not have a clear grip on the dynamics that develop in the partnership, meaning that they have little control over the choices that are made.
- (4) There is little feedback towards the local governmental entities about the activities of the partnership.
- (5) Especially the local council is marginalized in these interactions but also the executive board takes up a rather passive role.

As it are the local governments themselves who are often responsible for the creation of bottom-up partnerships, the 'democratic problem' lies partly in their own hands. Besides, the nature of the problem is linked with the type of partnership under discussion. As illustrated in the previous section, the function of the partnership – and also their policy impact – may differ. In partnerships that focus merely on information exchange, consultation and coordination, the mandate does not have to be as strict and accountability does not have to be interpreted identical as in arrangements where decisions are made or actions are taken with a policy impact on the member-municipalities.



## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The dissection of regional arrangements in the Mid – West region shows that cooperation at the intermediate level in Flanders covers in fact a broad range of practices at diverse geographical scales. The goals and organizational structures differ from light (informal partnerships for information exchange and consultation) to heavy (service delivery and regional policy making). Also the dynamics of cooperation and the related actors differ: sometimes the local initiative or local governments takes the upper hand and cooperation is then the result of a free choice of local actors. For some issues however localities are forced into cooperation structures by the provincial or Flemish government.

Our inventory and research helps to clarify the nature of the rescaling of the state: the rescaling is the result of bottom – up and top – down initiatives and covers as well joined government arrangements as collaborative governance arrangements integrating public and private organizations. By showing the nature and the content of regional governance, our research helps to clarify the political debate that is going on now in Flanders. It helps us to clarify the concepts used in the debate and gives us the chance to nuance the political discourse of muddling and of institutional fuzziness; of the lack of efficiency and of the democratic and accountability problem.

The rescaling of the state nowadays is the object of a rather classical institutional debate: what should we do about these regional arrangements, how should we transform them in order to create a more transparent, efficient and accountable government? The institutional agenda dominated, in line with the way former debates on the internal state reform of Flanders developed.

Our research helps us to discover the potentialities of a better adapted framework.

The first observation is that the problem as perceived by the ‘institutionalists’ has been created despite the institutional structure and has been even created throughout and from inside the institutional framework. The sharp rise of the number has been caused by the Flemish government in her role as meta – governor for intermunicipal cooperation and in the role as initiator of new regional arrangements, performing within the frameworks of sectoral policies of the Flemish ministers and their administration.

The second observation is that there is a need to adapt the criteria of efficiency and democracy to the contingent features of the regional arrangements. Efficiency and democracy have different meanings and activate other criteria for judgment and evaluation according to the nature of the arrangements.

The third and final observation is that the political discussion and the organization of the public sector in Flanders should be renewed and should be inspired by this relatively new phenomenon. Our conclusion is that a new phenomenon is judged and evaluated by using old frameworks inspired by classical institutional debates. The rescaling of the regional state should be understood first by using concepts, theories and instruments inspired by the literature on networks and collaborative governance. Our research, still in progress, has shown that using network approaches helps at least to understand, describe and analyze better what is really going on. The next step is that the network literature and research could be used to inspire the political debate: how should we improve the organization and functioning of the public sector in order to strengthen the capacities to work in and with networks in regional arrangements? Our research revealed that there still is a lot of work to do at the local level. But also at the central level there is need for an approach to improve the functioning of the Flemish government as a partner, an actor and as a meta – governor of regional arrangements. The rescaling of the state could inspire members of the state to rethink their roles in the network society.

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## Annex 1 – Cluster analysis for the province West-Flanders

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